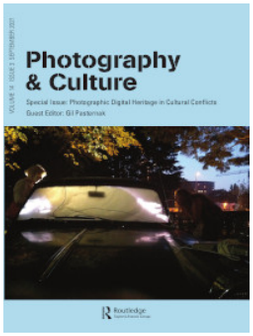

Photography and Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfpc20

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To cite this article: Christina Riggs (2021) Reborn-Digital Tutankhamun: Howard Carter and an Egyptian Archaeologist, Name Unknown, Photography and Culture, 14:3, 395-399, DOI: 10.1080/17514517.2021.1927371

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17514517.2021.1927371

Published online: 27 Jul 2021.

Photography & Culture

Volume 14—Issue 3
September 2021
pp. 395–399
DOI:
10.1080/17514517.2021.1927371

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One Photograph

Reborn-Digital Tutankhamun: Howard Carter and an Egyptian Archaeologist, Name Unknown

Christina Riggs

Figure 1. Howard Carter and an Egyptian archaeologist, name unknown. Photograph by Harry Burton, probably October 30th, 1925. © Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, p0770. Glass copy negative [converted into a positive image during digitization], 16x12 cm, made mid-1920s to mid-1930s.

Two men, elbows crooked and heads inclined, each with his left arm resting on one knee and his right hand stilled in mid-air, index finger pressed against the handle of a tool. They might be twins if the camera had not turned one into the shadow of the other, inscribing on the photographic surface the structural inequities of early twentieth-century archaeology in Egypt – inequities whose impact reverberates almost a century later. A bentwood café chair elevates the English archaeologist Howard Carter over his unnamed Egyptian colleague, one of the *ru'asa* who worked with him for at least a decade.[1] Electric lamplight casts the chair's own shadow on the whitewashed wall and blasts the wrinkles from Carter's white shirt and light skin. Behind him crouches the *ra'is* – perhaps Hussein Abu Awad or Hussein Ahmed Said – whose own white sleeve and tightly-wrapped turban frame darker skin. His figure, like his name, recedes into the background.

Taken in the tomb of Tutankhamun in Egypt's Valley of the Kings, in late October 1925, this photograph has led multiple material lives, first in analogue form and, since the early 2000s, in the digital realm, where it has gained such traction that it is the most frequent and consistent Google Image search result for "Carter Tutankhamun". Its ubiquity now extends to a digitally colourized version, too. Detached from its material biography and the conflicted historical circumstances of its creation, the photograph is free to signify in new ways what it arguably signalled from the start: the timeless allure of "ancient Egypt", the patient disinterest of science, and the unique ability of white, male archaeologists to unite the two. The presence of the unnamed *ra'is* supports, rather than challenges, such a reading. He holds a brush poised to sweep away the black crust of resin-rich oils that Carter hammers off the surface of Tutankhamun's gold coffin. What is bright and shiny is what matters; what is dark can be removed, undone, erased.

Like several other images that photographer Harry Burton took during the excavation, this shot was set up with publicity in mind. From the initial announcement of the discovery in late November 1922, Tutankhamun's intact tomb captivated the popular imagination via endless stories in the Western and Egyptian press (Riggs 2019, esp. 173–205, 207–9). But coinciding as it did with the moment Egypt had finally won semi-independence from British imperial control, the tomb became a flashpoint of cultural conflict over who controlled Egyptian archaeology – and by extension, Egypt itself. Accustomed to the privileges afforded foreign archaeologists, including a share of any artefacts they found, Carter declared himself on strike in February 1924. Egyptian authorities locked him out of the tomb and nearby workspaces.

If the conflict over Tutankhamun was a test case for reshaping the relationship between Egypt and its erstwhile master, British interests won. Carter resumed work in 1925, after Britain had forced the resignation of prime minister Sa'd Zaghloul and installed a more conciliatory government. That October, Carter was on site for the last and greatest reveal: the opening of Tutankhamun's nested coffins and mummified body. Discreet press coverage was the plan, with a more subdued approach to publicity photographs. Excavation photographer Harry Burton took this shot as Tutankhamun's two inner coffins, stuck together with libation residues, sat waiting to be taken to a nearby workspace ahead of the unwrapping. The tomb's almost-empty antechamber offered better light than the burial chamber and gave Burton enough height to elevate his camera, tilting the lens down over the coffins and two posed men. He exposed just one of the 18×24 cm glass negatives that were his preferred format. Either he knew he had the shot he wanted, or he was keeping stock back for whatever was to come. The photograph was published in the *Illustrated London News* in February 1926, amid extensive coverage of the opening of the coffins, revelation of the stunning funerary mask, and examination of the pharaoh's frail remains.[2]

Carter kept the large-format negative at his Egyptian home, a mile or two up the road from the Valley of the Kings. But at his apartment in London's Kensington, he had the half-plate copy

negative whose digital version concerns us here. Thin pins pierce the corners of the photographic print that almost fills the frame of the new negative. We glimpse slivers of the wooden copy stand, its surface riddled with pin holes. Unlike the artefacts from the tomb, which stayed in Egypt as state property, the excavation records were Carter's private property. On his death in 1939, his niece inherited his London archive and donated it to the newly-founded Griffith Institute for Egyptology at Oxford University, while his collaborators, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, inherited the contents of his Egyptian house, shipping papers and photographic materials to New York in 1948.

One photograph, two negatives whose paths – and eventual digitization – diverged. At mid-century, the gilded discovery had been consigned to history until new tensions around the Cold War, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the 1973 oil crisis put Tutankhamun back in the spotlight. Between 1961 and 1981, a series of touring exhibitions served as cultural diplomacy between Egypt and the host countries, including America, Japan, France, Britain, the Soviet Union, and West Germany. The Metropolitan Museum of Art coordinated the largest "Treasures of Tutankhamun" tour, which visited seven US cities between 1976 and 1979. The Museum's photographic holdings from the excavation featured in myriad publications and were enlarged to line gallery walls at each venue. A blown-up photograph of Carter working on the coffins with his Egyptian colleague – whose presence went unremarked – loomed large in a primetime television program that aired in July 1976, fronted by Orson Welles and sponsored, like the exhibition, by oil company Exxon. Thanks to such exposure, the photograph became better known than it had been half a century earlier, eventually entering all the major picture libraries as well.[3]

By the time the Griffith Institute at Oxford University began to digitize its own, more extensive, Tutankhamun archive in the late 1990s, it was satisfied that it, too, owned this now-famous photograph. The Institute's digitization of the Tutankhamun archive was far-sighted in many ways, ahead both of its time and the available technology. Yet its approach to the photographs emphasized the antiquities an image showed; the materiality of photography and its historiographic role were of no concern. Put another way, the perceived cultural asset that the Institute wished to turn into digital heritage was Tutankhamun himself – an ancient Egypt captured anachronistically by the camera. On the Griffith Institute website, each photograph was (and remains, as of this writing) searchable not by date, medium, size, location, or living human presence, but by the catalogue number Howard Carter gave each artefact. Negative p0770 is object 255, the inner coffin of solid gold.[4]

Technological limitations at the turn of the millennium meant that servers could handle only small-scale, low-resolution images, digitized by an outsourced firm using a batch of modern prints without reference to any corresponding negatives. However, improvements in the specifications and affordability of flatbed scanners meant that by the time UK copyright in Burton's photographs expired in 2010, seventy years after his death, the Griffith Institute could start to create new scans in-house, re-establishing its rights in his work and this time digitizing his photographs directly from the glass negatives. Although the new scans could not be incorporated in the online database (its underlying architecture was difficult to update), they influenced plans for a 2014 Ashmolean Museum exhibition, "Discovering Tutankhamun", in honour of the Institute's 75th anniversary.

As an iconic image of the discovery, negative p0770 was among those digitized ahead of the exhibition, and for the first time the Institute realized that it was a copy negative – a photograph of a photograph, which therefore lacked the crispness and tonal balance of Harry Burton's large-format plates. Adjusted settings were necessary to yield a satisfactory scan for the exhibition, especially since the curatorial team had decided to pursue digital colourization, inspired by a 1930s cigarette card

based on this photograph. Such collectible cards were printed in cheap and cheerful colours, an entirely different register than what Burton aimed for in his own photography. Undeterred, the Ashmolean Museum hired colourization firm Dynamichrome to colourize p0770 for the exhibition and accompanying catalogue (Collins and McNamara 2014, 101). The resulting image elaborates pink and tan on Carter's skin, the white clothing and tomb wall, and yellows on the ancient gold and modern wood; the Egyptian man's complexion is a near-uniform dark brown, an artefact of the copy negative's poor contrast.[5] Curators displayed the cigarette card, a monochrome print, and the digitally colourized image together, always cropping out the pinned corners and copying stand.

Once digitized and colourized, the photograph gained new prominence, spurred by media coverage of the Oxford exhibition. It inspired a scene – and matching publicity still – for the 2016 ITV miniseries *Tutankhamun,* which dramatized the discovery. Actor Max Irons played Carter as a heterosexual heartthrob working on the coffins in isolation, the distracting presence of his Egyptian colleague removed. With the colourization of p0770 counted a success, the Griffith Institute went on to collaborate with German entertainment firm Semmel Concerts, enabling Dynamichrome to colourize further Burton negatives for a commercial exhibition in New York.[6] The colourized images also became the basis of a 2020 television documentary *Tutankhamun in Colour,* with p0770 in pride of place.

The eventful socio-cultural life of p0770 suggests that, although digitization offers scope to challenge conventional narratives and foreground multivocal interpretations of the past, it more often simply adds another stratum to past practices and privileged ways of knowing. Control over the meaning of photographs in digital heritage has tended to rest with those who own the "original" by merit of their historical, cultural, and legal interests. Picture libraries are not neutral either, as they turn digitized photographs, often from obscure sources, into commercial profits. Digitization lets a photograph like p0770 circulate freely online, screen-grabbed and shared on social media in a near-infinite multiplication of how analogue photographs were reproduced for 150 years. Its colourization, too, is a novelty that is not entirely new, only more saturated in its digital reach and in its own compounding of the racial inequities, archival erasures, and cultural conflicts in which archaeology has always been complicit. In an echo of the marginalization of *ra'is* Hussein in this image (if either of the identities I have suggested is correct), Egyptians remain unnoticed, unnamed, and virtually unseen in their own history and its digital afterlives.

Like gold, technology tends to dazzle its beholders. Photographs did not tell the story of the Tutankhamun discovery: they created the only story that could be told. Digitized, sometimes with added colour, they still weave much the same tale. We do not see the dark or stop to linger in the shadow, blinded by the pixel-glint of ancient treasure and modern myth.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted, as always, to past and present staff of the Griffith Institute at Oxford University for facilitating my research on the Tutankhamun archive, for which they have cared so assiduously, and I thank its former director, Liam McNamara, for sharing with me his own reflections on the curation of "Discovering Tutankhamun". This piece was commissioned by Gil Pasternak, guest editor of this special issue of *Photography & Culture*, as a contribution to his research project *Digital Heritage in Cultural Conflicts* – DigiCONFLICT (2018-2021), which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Joint Programming Initiative on Cultural Heritage, grant agreement number 699523), implemented in the United Kingdom by the Arts and Humanities Research Council – AHRC, Project Ref AH/S000119/1.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. *Ru'asa* is the plural form of the Arabic word *ra'is*, which refers to a foreman, leader, or captain.
2. "Tutankhamen's third coffin – of solid gold: The uncovering", *Illustrated London News,* February 6, 1926, 232.
3. Getty Images 50615079 (LIFE Picture Collection 517781), 53367946 (LIFE Picture collection/ Mansell 01118469), 89856213 (Hulton Archive 2629); 122220478 (DEA De Agostini Editorial barcode 96503623); Bridgeman Images PVD1679749; Alamy 2CC67G7 (Contributor: IanDagnall Computing).
4. See http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringTut/, yielding http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/carter/255-p0770.html (accessed April 1, 2021).
5. A print of the corresponding large-format negative in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, most likely made by Burton himself, shows a much more balanced range of skin tones, perhaps achieved by dodging to lighten darker (underexposed) areas of the negative during the printing process. Such darkroom interventions are one of many visual qualities of analogue photographs that are lost when negatives are used as the basis of digitization.
6. The colourized photographs feature on the Griffith Institute website alongside monochrome versions: http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringtut/burton5/burtoncolour.html. For the exhibition see http://www.tutnyc.com/ and https://dynamichrome.com/casestudies/harry-burtons-tutankhamun (accessed April 1, 2021).

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